

24th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.7.21

Ruth 3:1-5

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ²Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." ⁵She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

Mark 12:38-44

As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (280)

You have heard it said this story of the widow in the Temple is about sincerity in devotion and generosity in giving. But I say unto you, this story is about religious exploitation. You have heard it said this widow is a model to be imitated for her sincerity in devotion and relative generosity in giving. But I say unto you she's someone who's been victimized by religious power, manipulated into giving more than is right. No, Jesus wasn't admiring this widow for her selflessness, he was contemptuous of the Temple cult that would have this widow think she was doing the right thing with her last two coins, all that she had to live on.

Now, she had nothing—and the Temple had, what, a penny?

Good thing we have another widow's story today as a point of contrast—one that has the tide of blessing flowing in the right direction.

As for the widow in the Temple, she would have Jesus leave in a final disgust. He would, from here, head back out to the Mount of Olives, during this, the middle of the week that would end with his crucifixion. He would head out to the Mount of Olives with his disciples, saying while going, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down," saying to his disciples in effect, "This thing is going down."

This thing—this power structure: this whole thing is going down.

You know, lots of people these days talk of “late capitalism,” as if we’re at the end of the reign of capitalism in the world. The makers of “Squid Game,” that post popular Netflix program, would say, “Yup.” The millions of viewers of that program might largely say, “Good riddance.” If you’ve seen it, you know what I’m talking about. If you haven’t, I say spare yourself. It’s a grim journey through a candy-colored death-camp, as if makers of Anime were to design Auschwitz. Here, though, instead of Nazism being the dealer of death, it’s the invisible hand of the market.

Other people scoff at people who think capitalism is at its apotheosis, is now toppling, having built itself on foundations of exploitation, which are firm for only so long. These people wonder, wizened, “What other way is there but capitalism?”

I don’t know. As for me? I don’t know. I guess I’m open to anything, will just hope for the best, will try not to get crushed, will try to help others not to get crushed.

They’d just expressed awe at these buildings, the disciples had. “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” they’d just said as they were leaving the Temple courts, heading back out through its gates, beyond its walls, back off the mount now to the Mount of Olives, a more comfortable environment for these villagers following Jesus.

And they were right to be filled with awe at the grandeur. That’s not just their provincialism talking. Ancient reports claim the largest of the stones to hold up the Temple were 68 feet long, 9 feet high, and 8 feet wide. Truly, Jerusalem and the Temple were feats of ambition, planning, political organizing, sound engineering, social stability, personal and corporate devotion, religious inspiration and sustaining. This city and Temple had stood for 500 years. And they were replicates for the original, which had stood for 500 years prior. And this wasn’t just a religious center. It was a *power* center. It was where questions of justice were adjudicated, where questions of law and custom were addressed, where negotiation between the people of Judea and Israel and the ways of the Roman Empire came to bear. We in our society have nothing equal to this—neither in age nor in scope. Maybe if Hollywood, Wall Street, and Washington D.C. were all gathered behind some grand protective wall, and stayed that way until the year 2300...? How likely do you think that is?

And yet: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” Which they would be, in the year 68—Rome attacking around the year of Mark’s writing this, about 30 years after Jesus is remembered to have said this. Rome attacking and burning, soldiers scraping and clawing, people looting, until this monument to divinely inspired human achievement was rubble. Talk about dedication.

And it's easy to hear this as some sort of magical prophecy: "How did he know?!" we might wonder of Jesus foretelling this unimaginable event, this inconceivable occurrence. But it's just as likely the case that this was simply what it *felt* like. It's just as likely that Jesus was but reading the signs of the times. Rome was cracking down, the people were rising up, factions were turning on one another, the center wasn't holding, the *Temple* wasn't holding, was spinning a centrifugal force. Three days after this Jesus would be crucified, an early casualty in the war that was not quite yet getting going, war being itself a thing that casts a long foreshadow, eventually to feel inevitable, even to feel like a welcome arrival, welcome to break the long building tension. All-out war.

One thing was likely sure, likely more and more sure: the people of the Temple cult and hierarchy were way out of touch with the people of the nations. These people for whom the ruling class held power particularly against Rome, and on whose behalf they exercised power in justice, in righteousness, and more and more over whom they lorded power, though perhaps with words of lovingkindness on their lips: they were so far away, removed, from what life actually felt like. The scribes might actually have believed this poor widow was right to give them all she had to live on. I think of televangelists who receive checks from tattered living rooms all around the country, lonely watchers of 24-hour television sending money to preachers who have private jets. Do they really believe the money of all those poor widows is well spent on them?

Money is funny that way. It's so very relative. Symbolic, a stand in for what has actual value, it so easily becomes diabolic, so very easily made to justify its every arbitrary use.

You know, the Sackler family developed Oxycontin and promoted it with the laughably vague statement that "it's believed less than 1% of pain patients would develop an addiction to the drug." "It's believed..." Twenty years into their manufacture of this drug, the Sacklers have collected around \$11 billion in profits from sales while hundreds of thousands of lives were lost to it and countless lives came unraveled because of it. Now, as of September, opioid money from the Sacklers in the amount of \$4.5 billion will go to treatment programs and other mitigating efforts across the country, though the cost of the damage it caused is estimated to be in the trillions of dollars.

\$4.5 billion: a huge sum of money, it leaves the Sacklers, though, with \$7 billion, still making them the richest family in the United States. How many billions of dollars could one extended family spend, do you think? Four households. And how much should someone addicted to opioids be expected to pay for his or her or their treatment? All they have to live on? What if it costs more? Temples aren't cheap, you know, and someone's gotta pay for that upkeep. And don't

you think that widow makes more use of the Temple than someone who's got work to do, a family to see to, a vineyard to keep? She probably spends her days just sitting in those courtyards, seeking shelter in those gates. Maybe she was even happy to have given her last two coins, all she had to live on. Jesus wasn't happy for her, though. This isn't the direction in which the tide of concern is supposed to flow.

Ruth appears this Sunday only by coincidence. The Book of Ruth isn't paired with this story on purpose. But she's welcome here, she, this young widow, Ruth, who impressed wealthy Boaz in her showing such care and concern for her old, widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz was, in fact, so impressed by this that he wanted to be a part of that, wanted even to marry Ruth. This, he explained when Ruth eventually asked what his intentions were. "All that you have done for your mother-in-law," he explained, "since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before."

A story from eight hundred years earlier, from the unrestful time of judges in the land, when social stability was a distant dream, the Book of Ruth begins when a famine gripped the land and the people. It tells of a man who took his wife, whose name was Naomi, and their two sons to Moab to live. Here they'd do better, even though this was a land of gentiles, for here there was at least food.

The two sons grew there and took wives there—foreigners who were in all other ways good choices for the two sons.

But then the father of the two sons died, and then the two sons themselves died—which left the three women, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth, all now widows. What hope did they have? Three drowning boats roped together as if this would help.

Naomi knew better. She decided to return to her homeland because a widow at least stood a chance there. The Law dictated care for the poor, for the orphan, for the alien in the land, for the widow. So, she told her gentile daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your new husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud and said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."

But Naomi said them, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a

husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters...”

So they wept aloud again—and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth clung to her, saying, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.”

So, the two women left Moab together, returned to the land of Judea, and to the village of Bethlehem, where Naomi had lived and where her kinsman Boaz still lived. And the two women gleaned in Boaz’s field until Boaz took particular notice of Ruth and then heard all that she had done—kindness for the least of these according to the Law, mercy for the least of these according to custom, hope for the hopeless woven into the fabric of life.

What had happened? 800 years hence, Jesus might well have sat across from the Temple treasury, listening to those loud thuds, large treasures falling into the treasury as people gave of a fraction of their wealth, the sound of glory, the sound of substance and importance, and then the silence that followed the widow’s giving all that she had.

What had happened to get the people to this place?

What has happened to get us to this place—of unraveling, of quarrelsome cruelty, of consuming selfishness and straight-up refusal even to *imagine* how we might be affecting one another, perhaps even *infecting* one another. Two recent trips to the grocery store, where two signs prominently posted declare masks as required for entry, had me confounded. So many people going without masks, like a challenge, a dare. The clerks don’t even bother *trying* to get people to cooperate. And why should they have to? They’re busy helping people buy what they need to live. They don’t have time to enforce what should be done as simply a matter of graciousness, simple cooperation and pro-sociability.

I really don’t get it.

It all just makes me want to stay home, to stay insulated from the world that is so story these days, so troubled. This, though we’re actually meant to participate in this world, to take part in and responsibility for this world, all for the sake of the reign of God, that it might be realized in the living of our days, that it might be manifest as we go about our business of grace—God who so loves this world and who longs for the world to be a place of abounding blessing, the tide of blessing flowing from the greatest of these to the least that all might rise, that blessing and love might be the all in all.

We're coming to the end of the church year. We have two more Sundays in this, Year B. This has us in the most pressing part of Mark's gospel, following Jesus not only to his own end but also imagining the whole known world as having reached an end. The world in which Jesus' crucifixion took place was a world of coming crisis, and the world in which Mark (and all the gospel writers) wrote their narratives of Jesus' life and his calamitous death was a world engulfed in crisis, a world truly at a breaking point. This is to say, these stories always land uneasily, they land in Sunday worship uneasier still, this a time when we perhaps expect sanctuary, an hour we've set aside perhaps for safe harbor.

But, no. Not these next few Sundays. Christianity is a faith firmly rooted in events of history, and this makes it unusual among the so-called world religions. Ours is an historical faith, an adamantly, insistently historical faith. Jesus lived. Jesus was crucified. Some from among his people saw him alive after that, and they built their lives anew around that experience, and bonded with others because of that experience, and planted themselves in history in a new way because of that experience, one day near Emmaus, one day near Damascus, one day in Jerusalem, another day in Jerusalem. Ours is a faith insisting upon history, and history is an often-painful journey, calamitous journey. I imagine we all feel more acutely aware of that than we have at maybe any other time in our lives. I know I do.

And I don't know what to do about that except to aim not to be crushed by whatever of history might be coming our way, and to aim that others not be crushed as well. Safe harbor means the most when storms are raging outside. A community of care, where the tide of blessing flows in the right direction, is most urgently needed when the world would have those abounding in blessing abounding still more while those bereft find themselves all the more at a loss.

This is to say, if you can make it on this journey with me and with this church to the end, then we together will know all the more something of the gift of Christ and the love of God.

And, look here is sustenance for that journey, the bread of life, the cup of salvation.

Thanks be to God.